

Dying of a broken heart is just the beginning.



THE
catastrophic
HISTORY OF
you AND me

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don't you (forget about me)

There's always that one guy who gets a hold on you. Not like your best friend's brother who gets you in a head-lock kind of hold. Or the little kid you're babysitting who attaches himself to your leg kind of hold.

I'm talking epic. Life changing. The "can't eat, can't sleep, can't do your homework, can't stop giggling, can't remember anything but his smile" kind of hold. Like, Wesley and Buttercup proportions. Harry and Sally. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. The kind of hold in all your favorite '80s songs, like the "Must Have Been Love"s, the "Take My Breath Away"s, the "Eternal Flame"s—the ones you sing into a hairbrush-microphone at the top of your lungs with your best friends on a Saturday night.

The very same hold you read about in your big sister's diary when she's out with her boyfriend, and you hope and pray and beg that it'll happen to you, but then it does and you go completely and totally insane and lose your entire grip

on reality or any sense of how things used to be before *he* walked into your life and ruined everything.

Love's super-sneaky like that. It creeps up the second you turn your head to check how cute your butt looks in that new pair of jeans. The minute you're distracted by the SATs, or who kissed who at your best friend's Sweet Sixteen, or the fact that you didn't get the lead in *Into the Woods* (I hate you, Maggie Elliot), and now you have to play Cinderella, when everyone knows it isn't as good a part as the witch.

Until suddenly you wake up one morning and realize The Truth: that some boy—a boy you've known your whole life who you never even dreamed would be actual boyfriend-material; a boy you never even thought was that cute; a boy who's kind of a dork and always wears that same skateboard T-shirt; a boy who is obsessed with *The Lord of the Rings* and the dragon tattoo he's going to get on his leg when he turns eighteen—is suddenly All You Can Think About.

The problem is, there is absolutely nothing “fun” about falling in love. Nope. Mostly it just makes you feel sick and crazy and anxious and nervous that it's going to end miserably and ruin your whole life. And guess what: Then it does.

Okay, yes, he smells amazing. And yes, you melt whenever he texts you to say good night, and yes, his eyes are soooo blue. And yes, he holds your hand on the way to geometry and he gets your weird little secrets and he makes you laugh so hard you snort your Mountain Dew in front of him but you don't care even though it's the most embarrassing thing ever. And yes, when he kisses you, the rest of the

world disappears and your brain shuts off and all you can feel are his lips and nothing else matters.

And yes, he tells you that you're beautiful, and suddenly, you are.

News flash: The whole thing is a huge mess and a giant nightmare and it's all about to explode in your face and you have *no* idea what you've gotten yourself into. Love is no game. People cut their ears off over this stuff. People jump off the Eiffel Tower and sell all their possessions and move to Alaska to live with the grizzly bears, and then they get eaten and nobody hears them when they scream for help. That's right. Falling in love is pretty much the same thing as being eaten alive by a grizzly bear.

Believe me, I should know.

Because, did I mention? It happened to me. No, I do not mean that I was eaten alive by a grizzly bear. The way I went was much, much worse.

I was fifteen years old when I died of a broken heart. No urban myths or legends here. I'm talking one hundred percent Death by Heartbreak. No, I didn't kill myself. No, I didn't go on a hunger strike. I didn't catch pneumonia wandering around in the rain in tears, *Sense and Sensibility*-style, even though I'm kind of obsessed with Kate Winslet. Nope, I did it the old-fashioned way. My heart literally **BROKE IN HALF**.

I know, right? I didn't think a person could actually die from that either. But I'm living (well, not *living*, per se) proof. Even if most people still blame my sudden death on the heart murmur I've had since I was born. Even if it

wasn't a big deal growing up, and I was always perfectly healthy and never had to take medicine or not play sports or anything like that. Actually, it was the total opposite.

I was strong. Energetic. Kind of a tomboy. I was even picked for my high school's varsity diving team when I was still in seventh grade.

Not that it mattered.

In the end, my heart broke anyway.

My name was Brie. Yup, like the cheese. It's kind of funny, everyone always assumes my parents were, like, giant cheese freaks—with a daughter named Brie and a son named Jack—but I was really Aubrie and he was really Jackson.

Everything was going great for me the year before I died. I lived in the most beautiful spot on the entire planet. Northern California. A place called Half Moon Bay, a sleepy little seaside town nestled between redwood forests and rugged Pacific coastline, twenty-eight miles south of San Francisco. The beach was *literally* my backyard.

I had the perfect family: Mom, Dad, Jack, and Hamloaf (he's our basset hound).

I had the perfect best friends: Sadie Russo, Emma Brewer, and Tess Hoffman.

And I had the perfect boyfriend: track star, senior class vice president, Hottie McHotterson, Jacob Fischer.

Before I died, I had everything and more.

I was happy.

But all of that changed on the night of October 4, 2010—

the night I felt a terrible shooting pain in my chest and collapsed across the dinner table from Jacob.

The night I never woke up.

Just like that. BOOM. *Game over*. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. It was the end of a life.

My life.

In the first couple of hours after my death, I guess I figured all my years of running and diving and climbing trees and biking down San Francisco's hills at practically illegal speeds had finally caught up with me. My heart must have been weaker than everyone had thought. There must have been something really, really wrong with me after all. Something even my dad couldn't have predicted. (And he's a world-famous cardiologist.)

I took my last breath on a Monday. Not a bad day of the week to go, actually, since everyone's already pretty grumpy by the time Sunday night rolls around. I mean, at least I didn't ruin anyone's big Friday or Saturday night plans, right? Aren't I thoughtful?

After a couple of days, neighbors started leaving all kinds of stuff on our front porch. Casseroles, quiches, you name it. Someone even left a turkey, like all Thanksgiving-style, right out of the oven with stuffing up its butt and everything. I guess that's what you're supposed to do when someone dies: Leave a bunch of food on their doorstep so the rest of the family doesn't forget to eat. Too bad they forgot we were all vegetarians. Well, except Hamloaf. (Bet he had a good meal that night.)

Jack decided he was in charge of checking the porch every day, especially since Hamloaf had a habit of eating everything in his stubby, snorty little path. My brother was always good like that, always stepping up without anyone having to ask. Jack was only eight when I died, and while I'm not sure he understood why I was gone, he was old enough to understand I wasn't coming back.

Oh, his face. Big green eyes and wavy dark hair, just like me. He even had a tiny dimple in his left cheek—totally adorable whenever he got the giggles, which he did a lot.

My brother and I had been best friends ever since the second Mom and Dad brought him home from the hospital and he passed out in my arms. There's a picture of it on our fridge—he's in a little blue blanket and hat, and I'm wearing my Scooby-Doo pj's with my hair pulled back in chaotic pig-tails. From that day on, he and I were pals. Comrades. We were the feeling you got from that Raffi song "Apples and Bananas." He was the only one who could beat me at Connect Four.

My memorial service was rough, obviously, but I think the hardest part was watching Jack, staring off into space.

He didn't cry. He didn't have to.

The whole school showed up. Mrs. Brenner, my pixie blond English teacher and across-the-street neighbor since I was six, sat next to my mom, holding her hand. My dad was wearing a charcoal blazer and the tie I'd given him on his fortieth birthday—the one with pink and purple elephants on it. His face was hard, tired, and I could tell from the dark shadows under his eyes that he hadn't slept

in days. He was sitting on Mom's right side, with his arm wrapped around her. He held on tight, like he was afraid to let go. Like Mom might crumble into pieces.

Or that maybe he would.

I couldn't help watching Mom, in particular. The way she'd locked her eyes on a flower arrangement across the room. The way her skin seemed cracked, like the sadness of me being gone had worked its way into her pores. The barely-there scent of her rosewater perfume lingering in the space between us.

Mom.

I glanced out over the crowd, thinking how surreal it felt to be sitting in front of so many people. Noticing all the details and wondering why so many of them had barely bothered to say hi to me when I was alive. But here they were anyway.

Aaron Wilsey, a kid from seventh-grade geography, who never did his homework and used to draw sharks on his notebook all the time. Lexi Rhodes, who started wearing thick black eyeliner the first day of ninth grade. Mackenzie Carter, who got really into Jesus a few summers ago and never looked back. I wondered if she believed I was with him now. I wondered if the thought made her feel better.

Hundreds of kids, friends, parents, and teachers lined the rows of the Pacific Crest High School auditorium, where I had just begun my junior year. Then I remembered: Mine was not the first memorial service I'd been to here. It was the *second*.

The first had been for a girl a few years older than me

named Larkin Ramsey, who had died in a fire that started after she left a candle burning overnight in her bedroom. I hadn't spoken to Larkin in at least two years before she died, but our families had carpooled together when we were little and she and I had actually been pretty good friends back in the day (jumping on the trampoline in her backyard, racing each other in our Rollerblades after school, that kind of stuff). She'd had this gorgeous black hair and taught me how to give myself a French braid, which had more or less upped my fourth-grade-coolness factor by at least thirty-nine percent.

Then around ninth grade for her, and seventh grade for me, we'd had a fight over something lame that I can't even remember and the two of us just sort of drifted apart. I started to get really into diving, and she started to get really into photography and mostly just doing her own thing. By the time I finally made it to high school, hers had become just another face in the very crowded hallway.

It used to make me sad, remembering all the fun we'd had together as kids. But I guess the truth is, sometimes friends drift in and out of our lives like fashion accessories—in one season and out the next.

Kind of like girlfriends, right Jacob?

I remember the morning I'd heard the news about Larkin. Our coach had called the team in for a six a.m. practice and I had just come up from a dive—a near perfect twister off the three-meter springboard. A few of my teammates were whispering like crazy about something over by the locker room

door, so I swam across the pool and jumped out to see what was up. I could still feel the adrenaline pumping through me as I pulled off my diving cap and began to towel off.

"Hey Mo, what's going on?" I whispered. "Did the Cy-clones chicken out of our meet or something?"

Her eyes told me I wasn't even close. "There was a fire last night," she said. "A girl in eleventh grade was killed."

I paused, the towel dropping through my hands.

"Who? Who died?"

She put her hand on my shoulder as the other girls looked on. "Your old friend, I think. Larkin Ramsey."

I can still recall the feeling in my stomach as the words left Morgan's mouth. Can still remember the clammy cool of the water droplets as they rolled down my back like tears.

My old friend.

Larkin Ramsey.

We'd all come to her memorial service as a family. Who'd have thought, just a couple of years later, we'd be sitting here again—this time for me?

The same white lights were strung up all around the room, and a huge picture of my face—that thing must have been at least ten feet tall—was parked center stage. Taken only six months ago at Judy's, where we'd been celebrating Jack's birthday. In the picture I had on a blue sweater over my gray shirt with the sunflowers on it, and my hair was pulled back half up with sparkly blue barrettes. Dad must have caught me off guard with one of his ridiculously bad jokes (*What do you call a piece of cheese that's not yours? Nacho*

cheese!) and I'd been laughing at him when he snapped the photo. Not exactly my favorite picture of myself, but at least I didn't have a giant zit on my nose or any food stuck in my teeth or something really embarrassing like that. Still, it was super-weird to see my gigantic face up in front of the whole auditorium with, like, millions of eyes staring at it.

Then came the part where people got up to share all their memories. My chemistry teacher, Dr. O'Neil, talked about the time I almost set my desk on fire trying to build an electromagnet (innocent miscalculation), and how I was always the first person to volunteer whenever a younger student needed homework help after school.

My diving coach, Trini, got up with two of my teammates, Alli and Mo, and told the story about last year's final meet against San Mateo Prep, when I'd added in a surprise last-second forward pike that pushed us into first place and guaranteed our team a spot at regionals. Alli talked about how I was always the first one into the water and the last one out. Mo talked about my unparalleled love for and encyclopedic knowledge of all music (but especially '80s), my utter obsession with Wendy's Frostys, and how much the team was going to miss me.

My Spanish teacher, Mrs. Lopez, decked out in one of her signature linen dresses, told everyone about the time I translated an entire episode of *Friends* into Spanish and sang "Smelly Cat" ("*Gato Maloliente*") to the class. She sang a few lines of the song and everyone laughed, even my parents.

The thing is, all of the stories were funny. All of the

memories were sweet. For a second, it was kind of easy to forget this was a memorial service. It didn't *feel* like anyone had died. It wasn't morbid or depressing or creepy. It was actually kind of fun, hearing how much everyone liked me. I remember feeling silly that I'd been worried about it; for thinking it was going to be too hard to watch. But the mood was light. Like some sort of celebration or party.

And this time, I was the *star*.

Then Sadie, Emma, and Tess got up from their seats. I watched them walk to the stage, hand in hand. They all looked so young. So alive.

Pretty, petite, dark-haired Sadie, wearing the mood ring I'd given her on her thirteenth birthday. Emma's blond hair pulled back from her face, her eyes puffy from crying. Tess a total mess of red hair and freckles, holding a single daylily in her left hand.

My favorite flower.

It was crazy to see the three of them up there together without me, like the universe was off-balance somehow. Our initials spelled BEST, as in, best thing ever. When we were little, Dad used to call us the Fearsome Foursome. Except now they were minus their fourth.

They couldn't know I was sitting on the stage, watching, just a few feet away. Wishing I could tell them everything would be okay, even if I wasn't so sure. But the dead can't talk, after all.

My friends glanced at each other and took deep breaths. Then Sadie began to sing. Her voice was lonely. Beautiful.

I will remember you. Will you remember me?

Don't let your life pass you by. Weep not for the memories.

She wavered for a split second on *memories*, her clear soprano voice catching. Emma and Tess joined her then, linking arms. My three best friends in the whole wide world. Their heartbroken harmony echoing against the total stillness of the room.

Oh god.

I looked around.

Mom had begun to cry, her body shaking. Dad, trying to be strong. Tears spilling down his face anyway. Mom's arms wrapped around Jack. His eyes blank and staring straight ahead. Her face buried in his hair. With just those first few lines of the song, the entire room had fallen apart. Teachers, friends. Kids I'd loved, kids I'd hated, kids I'd never really known. All of them crying.

Crying for me.

Then I saw him. His dark hair, longish, messy. His stormy blue eyes locked firmly on the white linoleum floor. The soft, worn North Face jacket I'd snuggled into so many times. His perfect lips. The lips I'd kissed every day for eleven months. He had snuck into the back of the auditorium like a ghost. But he wasn't the ghost.

I was.

That's when I lost it.